

Unit Five: Main Teachings of the Buddha (Part II)

Anātma (the Doctrine of no-Soul)

A large amount of discourses of the Buddha has been devoted to criticize and reject the idea of soul, self or *Atman*. Buddhism advocates man's freedom from suffering through the realization of the things as they really are. Cause of suffering is the attachment. Therefore, it is logical to think that freedom from suffering comes through detachment. Detachment is possible only when one sees things as they really are. According to Buddhism, the idea of soul is the main obstruction of man, which prevent himself from seeing the things as they really are. Therefore, Buddhism has paid much attention on the conception of soul, which obstructs man's freedom from suffering.

There are two concepts of soul, which were subjected to criticism of Buddhism. One is personally conceived idea of soul or self by the individuals. All the ordinary beings have necessarily an idea that there is some thing permanent, which is going through all the experiences, binding them together as a thread. This leads to three ideas of 'This is mine' (*Etam mama*) 'This is I am' (*Eso aham asmi*) and 'This is my self' (*Eso me atta*). This idea of self is an inevitable result of the unawareness of the real nature of things. Believing in such a conception of self is considered in Buddhism as "*sakkāyaditthi*"; heresy of individuality. In modern usage it is known as empirical soul.

The second kind of soul is philosophically conceived soul. This idea of soul, which also was subjected to criticism and rejection by the Buddha, was born in the mind of rational thinkers prior to the Buddha. Particularly, Upanishadic thinkers presented this theory of soul as the underlying substance or principle, either of an individual or of the entire world. The underlying principle of the individual was known as individual soul (*pratyag-ātman*) and that of the world as cosmic or universal soul (*jagat-ātman*). Individual soul, which is a part of the cosmic soul, acquired by every individual being, has to go through a series of life until it gets purified and united with the cosmic soul, from which it was emanated at a time unknown to us. This soul either individual or cosmic is eternal, everlasting and permanent. It is the driving force of life. And it is the doer and enjoyer (*kartā ca bhoktā ca*) of the experiences of the individual. Believing in such a soul is considered in Buddhism as *Attavāda-upādāna*, clinging on to soul theory.

According to Buddhism, these two kinds of belief of soul are equally harmful to the individual, as it covers the real nature of things, seeing of which is the necessary condition for the detachment towards the world. There is a view among some of the scholars that, what the Buddha negated, is the metaphysical or philosophically conceived soul, not the empirical soul. But in reality the Buddha rejected more empathetically, belief in so called empiric self than the metaphysical self. It is clear that what the Buddha rejected in his second sermon, *Anattalakkhana-sutta*, was none other than belief in personal soul.

The term soul, self or *Ātman* implies by definition an entity which is unchanging, everlasting and eternal. Buddhism does not recognize such an entity within or without the man. The reality of the man or of the world is the change, impermanence and unsubstantiality. Apart from this evanescent and impermanent nature of the things, there is no some thing, which is eternal and immutable. Therefore, according to Buddhism, the concept of soul is a false imaginary idea, superimposed upon changing empirical stuffs.

It is the nature of the ordinary man that he is compelled to think, by his ignorance, that he has an inner soul or ego, which governs his inner nature. With this idea of soul or ego or 'I', there arises a correlative idea of 'mine'. The ideas of 'I' and 'mine' are the source of all evil. Though they are false ideas, they make terrible harm not only to the man who produced them, but also to other people as well. They completely obstruct the way of freedom of the man. Therefore, it was necessary for Buddha to make man realize the illusory nature of his idea of soul.

To show that there is no soul in man within himself or without, the Buddha analyzed the empirical existence of man into five aggregates, which constitute his existence. They are *Rūpa* (material aspect), *Vedanā* (feelings), *Saññā* (concepts), *Sankhāra* (mental formations), and *Viññāna* (perceptions or consciousness). The concept of aggregate (*khandha*) in Buddhist teaching needs a special clarification in order to have a clear knowledge about the concept of being or world. The five constituents of the being are named as five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*). Each aggregate signifies a group or a collection of the same kind; in other words, each aggregate is constituted by different constituents of the same kind. Therefore, the term aggregate does not denote an endurable entity, but something analyzable into its constituents. Thus, the aggregate of form (*rūpa*), which is the constituent of five external objects and five internal sense organs, is a collection of forms, analyzable into their material elements known as primary and secondary elements.¹ These material elements too, according to the Buddhist analysis, are not discrete entities, which have independent existence. Aggregate of Feelings (*vedanā*) is also a collection of feelings, which are arisen as the result of sensory contact taking place at a time when sense organs, sensory objects and the corresponding sensory consciousness meet together. (*Cakkhuñca paticca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññānam tinnam sangati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā*).²

Both the aggregates of concepts (*saññā*) and mental formations (*sankhāra*) also have to be understood in the same way as aggregate of feelings, for they too refer to bundles of mental factors, which are arisen with the consciousness when it appears in the process of sensory knowledge. Aggregate of consciousness also refers to a collection or a bundle of consciousnesses, which come to arise because of sense objects and sensory organs. Buddhism does not accept the consciousness as a single endurable entity, which has an independent existence. According to Buddhism, the being is composed only of these five aggregates. There is nothing more than that. Therefore, the concept of soul is mere creation of mind, taking the sum total of existence of these five aggregates.

The futility of the concept of soul was pointed out nicely by the Buddha in the practical way in the *Anattalakkhana sutta*. In that sutta, the Buddha taking each aggregate asked the monks three questions in the following way:

Do you think O' monks, whether the form (*Rūpa*) is permanent or impermanent?"

The monks replied: "O Lord, it is impermanent".

Then the Buddha asked: "Whether some thing which is impermanent is happy or unhappy?"

The reply of the monks was: "O Lord, it is unhappy."

The third question of the Buddha was: Whether it is suitable to see some thing which is impermanent, unhappy, and evanescent as 'this is mine', 'this is I am' and 'this is my soul?'

¹ "Yam kiñci rūpam sabbam rūpam cattāri mahābhūtāni catunnañ ca mahābhūtānam upādāyarūpam". M.ii. 87.

² M. Madhupindikasutta.

The monks replied: 'No, O Lord.'

When the Buddha asked the same questions with regard to other four aggregates, the same answers were given by the monks. The characteristics of what is called soul are permanence, bliss and substantiality. Here in the discourse of *Anattalakkhana*, the Buddha pointed out that all the characteristics of the soul are not available in each aggregate, which constitute the existence of man and in that way, The Buddha has shown the futility of taking each aggregate or sum total of aggregate as mine, I and my soul.³

Buddhism does not reject anything without a base. Really, Buddhist non-soul doctrine depends on the exact nature of the word. Real nature according to Buddhism is the conditional existence, as revealed by the theory of dependent origination or *Paṭiccasamuppāda*. Emergence of any thing in the world depends on the causes and conditions. Without causes and conditions nothing comes into existence. The nature of what is arisen because of causes and condition is the destruction.⁴ If every thing is in the flux of arising and vanishing, there can not be any thing independent and permanent; some thing like soul or Ātman. Therefore, Buddhism accepts soullessness on the basis of its doctrine of *Paṭiccasamuppāda*.

It should be equally emphasized here that, though Buddhism rejects the imaginary concept of soul, it does not maintain in any way the doctrine of non-soul-ness. Buddhism presents the doctrine of Non-Soul in order to reject the belief of the permanent soul (*Sassatavāda*), which is going against the real nature of the beings. But at the same time, Buddhism rejects the theory of non soul, which is the belief in utter destruction (*Ucchedavāda*) of the beings. Therefore, Buddhism is neither eternalism nor nihilism. In that sense, Buddhism is realism. According to Buddhism, the true nature of what is depending on causes and conditions is both emergence and cessation. As Buddhism accepts both arising and vanishing nature of things, it rejects both Ātmavāda and *Anātmavāda*.⁵

The Doctrine of Kamma and Punabbhava

Concept of *Kamma* in Buddhism is closely connected with the concept of *Punabbhava* (rebecoming or rebirth), for *punabbhava* depends on the *Kamma*, or in other words *Kamma* is the main cause for *Punabbhava*. Buddhism accepts the cycle of births of beings. Life of a being is not limited only to the present life. It is coming from inconceivable time period in the past and going further into the future until it gets the freedom from its causes. The Buddha has pointed out that 'inconceivable is the beginning of this *Samsāra*; an earliest point is not discerned of beings who, obstructed by spiritual ignorance and fettered by craving, run and wander on'.⁶ The continuation of the causal relation of one life process with another life process is described by Buddhism with the help of *Kamma*. *Kamma* or *Sankhāra* is considered to be one factor which brings forth the consciousness, which is responsible for the beginning of new life process. It is pointed out in the discourses in the explanation of *Samsāric* existence of the beings, in accordance with the doctrine of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* as *Sankhārapaccayā Viññānam* (because of the *Sankhāra* or *Kamma*, consciousness arises). The way how *Kamma* brings forth consciousness in the new life process is nicely explained by the Buddha in the following passage of a discourse:

³ Mahāvaggapāali, *Anattalakkhana*-sutta.

⁴ "Yam kiñci samudayadhammam sabbam tom nirodhadhammam"

⁵ Samyutta-nikāya, Kaccāna-vacchagotta-sutta.

⁶ S. 11. 178

Yañ ca kho bhikkhave ceteti yañ ca pakappeti yance anuseti. Ārammanam etam hoti viññāṇassa thitiyā. Ārammane sati patiṭṭhā viññānāssa hoti. Tasmin patiṭṭhite viññāne virulhe āyatim punabbhavabhinibbatti hoti.⁷

"Brethren, what one intends and what one plans and whatever one has a tendency: this becomes a basis for the persistence of consciousness. When there is a basis, there is a support for the establishing of consciousness. When consciousness is established and has come to growth, there is the production of future renewed existence.

In this passage, the phrase 'what one intends and what one plans and whatever one has a tendency' refers to *Kamma* or *Samkhāra*. This *sutta* explains that there is the new existence, when there is a *Kamma* as the basis or the object to arise the consciousness. Consciousness which comes to arise on the object of *Kamma*, is the new consciousness, which is responsible for other factors such as Name and form and six sense bases (*Nāmarūpa, Salāyatana*) in the new life process of the being. *Kamma* is considered as a necessary condition for the new life process. This is very clearly pointed out by the Buddha in the *Atthirāga Sutta* in *Samyutta Nikāya* in the following way: "Yattha natthi sankhāranam uddhi natthi tattha punabbhavābhinibbatti."⁸ (Where there is no growth of volitional formation, there is no production of future renewed existence.)

According to the discourses of the Buddha, doctrines of *Kamma* and *punabbhava* are not mere formulations of the Buddha. They are said to be the parts of his enlightenment. On the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha is said to have remembered past lives more than a hundred thousand and experienced "With the divine eye (clairvoyance), purified and surpassing that of human beings passing away and arising: base and noble, well-favoured and ill-favoured, to happy and unhappy destinations as *Kamma* directs them."⁹

According to the Buddhist doctrine of *Kamma*, *Kamma-s* can produce two kinds of result known as *Paṭisandhi-vipāka* and *Pavatti-vipāka*. *Paṭisandhi-vipāka* keeps going the stream of mental process providing new consciousness to bridge the gap between past life and the present life, or between present life and the future life. When the effective power of *kamma*, which produces a new stream of consciousness, comes to an end and death intervenes, *Paṭisandhi-vipāka* of a *kamma* produces again a new series of consciousness. So the function of *Paṭisandhi-vipāka* is to maintain the continuation of life process in the *Samsāric* existence. *Pavatti-vipāka* is a kind of result of the *kamma*, which maintains the life span between the birth and the death providing necessary supports.

Volition or intention involved in mental, verbal or bodily activities is known as *Kamma* or in other words, *kamma* is the psychological impulse behind the action. *Kamma* is always a deliberate activity of the being. The Buddha defines *kamma* as "It is will (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call *kamma*; having willed, one act through body, speech or mind".¹⁰ As a *kamma* is done by his own will, being has to hold the responsibility of that. So, the result of the *kamma* has to be borne by the doer alone. The law of *kamma* does not act in a haphazard way. It gives the result when it is ripened only to the doer in accordance with its nature and quality.

⁷ S. Nidāna samyutta, II. p.65

⁸ S. Nidana vagga, p.102.

⁹ M. I. 22

¹⁰ A. III. 415

Nature and the quality of the *kamma* depend on the manner how it is grounded on the mind when it is done. It is the psychological law that every deliberate activity, whether mental, verbal or bodily, is first rooted in the mind. It is the expression of a mental process. These mental processes are rooted in greed, hatred, illusion, non greed, non hatred or non illusion. Mental process accompanied with will or intention and rooted in greed, hatred or illusion is known as *Akusala* or unwholesome *kamma*. If such a mental process is rooted in non greed, non hatred or non illusion, it is known as *Kusala* or wholesome. While unwholesome *kamma*-s give the bad results, the wholesome *kamma*-s give the good results. Therefore, it is stated in the Dhammapada that 'if some thing is spoken or done with the defiled mind, that brings suffering or unhappiness, and if some thing is spoken or done with the pleasant mind, that brings happiness'.¹¹

Buddhist doctrine of *Kamma* is not determinism. The Buddha opposed deterministic theories presented by the thinkers. *Pubbekata-hetuvāda*, the theory that every thing happens because of the past *kammas*, of Jainās was rejected by the Buddha saying that 'the believer of the *Pubbekata-hetuvāda* denies the power of the will (*Chanda*) and the effort (*Viriya*)'.¹² Buddhism advocates the effective power of man's will and the effort for the better life, materially as well as spiritually. Therefore, according to Buddhism, it is wrong to say that the karmic law determines the whole life of a being. *Karma* is one among the several laws which affect the life of the beings. Buddhism recognizes five kinds of law, which govern the events pertaining to the life of the beings. They are known as *Dhamma-niyāma* (natural law), *Citta-niyāma* (psychological law), *Utu-niyāma* (geographical law), *Kamma-niyāma* (Karmic or ethical law), and *Bija-niyama* (biological law). Therefore, *karma* alone is not responsible for every thing of the man. But at the same time we have to accept that karmic law also has its own power just like other laws operative in certain aspect of the beings.

Though the *kamma* is operative in its own territory, its law is not regarded as something unavoidable. Peter Harvey put it in this way: "The law of *karma* is not regarded as rigid and mechanical, but as the flexible, fluid and dynamic outworking of the fruits of action."¹³ By exercising man's own will and effort, *kamma*-s are said to be suppressed and over come. Buddhism accepts the efficacy of the right effort along with man's will for the removal (of the power) of already arisen unwholesome *kamma*-s, and for the growth of the already arisen wholesome *kamma*-s.¹⁴ Buddhist spiritual path is designed for the destruction of the roots, which produce the *kamma*-s (*kammakkhaya*). If the law of *karma* is deterministic and unavoidable, such a spiritual path becomes null and void. Therefore, Buddhism is going against the karmic determinism.

Kamma belongs to the ethical realm. Its goodness or badness mostly depends on motive behind the action. As already pointed out, every intentional action is necessarily done by the individual motivated by a mental impulse. Six kinds of such mental impulses are recognized by Buddhism namely, *Raga* (Greed), *Dosa* (hatred), *Moha* (ignorance or illusion), *Alobha* (non-greed), *Adosa* (non-hatred) and *Amoha* (non-illusion). The first three motives or mental roots are regarded as

¹¹ ..."manasā ce paduṭṭhena bhāsatī vā karoti vā tato nam dukkhamanveti", Dhammapada, verse 1

"Manasā ce pasannena bhāsatī vā karoti vā tato nam sukhamanveti". Dhammapada, verse 2.

¹² M. Devadaha-sutta

¹³ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, P.41.

¹⁴ S. Scavibhanga-sutta, "Uppannānam akusalānam dhammānam pahānāya...; Uppannānam kusalānam dhammānam bhiyyobhāvāya chandam janeti viriyam ārabhati"

unwholesome or unskillful while the others are regarded as wholesome or skillful. The unwholesomeness or wholesomeness is determined according to their defiling or pleasing nature. Another criterion in deciding whether an action is unskillful or skillful is given by the Buddha in the practical way in relation to the effect of the action. If the action conduces to the harm (*byābhādhāya*) of oneself, of others or of both, such action is unskillful and if it conduces to the benefit (*hitāya*) for oneself, of others or of both, it is skillful.¹⁵

The ethical law or the law of *kamma* according to Buddhism is operative in bringing the result of the action only to the doer of it, in accordance with its nature and gravity. The time of issuing result is determined according to the time spent for the maturity of the action or availability of the occasion. The law of *kamma* is explained in the *Samyuttanikāya* in the following way:

"According to the seed that's sown,
So is the fruit ye reap therefrom
Doer of good (will gather) good
Doer of evil, evil (reaps).
Sown is the seed, and planted well.
Thou shall enjoy the fruit thereof."¹⁶

Recommended Reference

Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Gorden Fraser, London, 1978
Narada, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, Publication of the Buddhist Missionary Society, Malatsia, 1988
Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.

¹⁵ M. I. 415-16

¹⁶ Kindred Saying, I. 293